



United States Mission to the OSCE

Reply to Ambassador Ibrahim Djikic, OSCE Head of Center in Ashgabat

As delivered to the Permanent Council
by Ambassador Stephan M. Minikes
Vienna
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Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

It is a pleasure to welcome Ambassador Djikic here today in his first appearance at the Permanent Council. Ambassador, you have indeed a challenging job ahead, but clearly from your report, you are already commendably well-versed in the issues facing the Center in Ashgabat.

We continue to be impressed by the Center's efforts and achievements in what is clearly a very challenging operating environment. We note that the Government of Turkmenistan has increased its attention to, and its participation in, certain of the Center's activities.

We also understand that the High Commissioner for National Minorities had a useful visit to Ashgabat in December and will be received again in Turkmenistan at the end of the month.

We hope these visits will result in the invitation to international presences accredited in Ashgabat to visit prison facilities that President Niyazov promised some time ago.

Moreover, we reiterate our call for immediate access to all prisoners, including those held in connection with the November 2002 armed attack on President Niyazov. The President, we understand, offered such access in a recent meeting with Foreign Minister Rupel, and we urge Ambassador Djikic to follow up on this issue.

In particular, we would like information on the welfare and whereabouts of Boris Shikhmuradov and our former colleague, Batyr Berdiyev. There has been a troubling lack of information about either of these two gentlemen, who are among dozens being held *incommunicado* in Turkmen prisons.

We share the Center's concern about other prisoners, including Mr. Durdykuliev and Mr. Aymuradov.

Mr. Chairman, while Turkmenistan has taken some steps hinting at positive action, such as becoming party to important UN conventions, even these lack implementing legislation and corresponding policy changes.

More troubling, however, is that Turkmenistan has not delivered on the most important things, which are: fundamental reforms in democratization, in rule of law, in human rights and in freedom of the media -- in short, in compliance with its OSCE commitments across the board.

Some of the most egregious features of laws on NGOs and religious groups have been

softened or reversed. Nevertheless, these entities still face considerable difficulties under remaining legal provisions, difficulties that are exacerbated by bureaucratic hurdles and by inertia which prevent NGOs and religious organizations from enjoying the few freedoms accorded to them under Turkmen law.

Mr. Chairman, as the High Commissioner noted in his presentation to the Permanent Council last week, there is important work ahead in Turkmenistan on education.

Areas of focus must be content, years of compulsory schooling, greater access to higher education and striking the balance between promoting the state language and protecting minority languages.

Over time, Turkmenistan will benefit from having a well-educated population capable of helping the country meet its modern needs. Turkmenistan should move swiftly to reverse the current trend that restricts access to education, limits years of compulsory schooling, and is overly dependent on only one textbook.

Mr. Chairman, before closing I would like to thank Ambassador Djikic and his staff for their perseverance and for their dedication. They are doing a tough job in a very tough place and deserve our unwavering support. And, as always, the United States stands ready to - offer the Center all appropriate assistance.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.